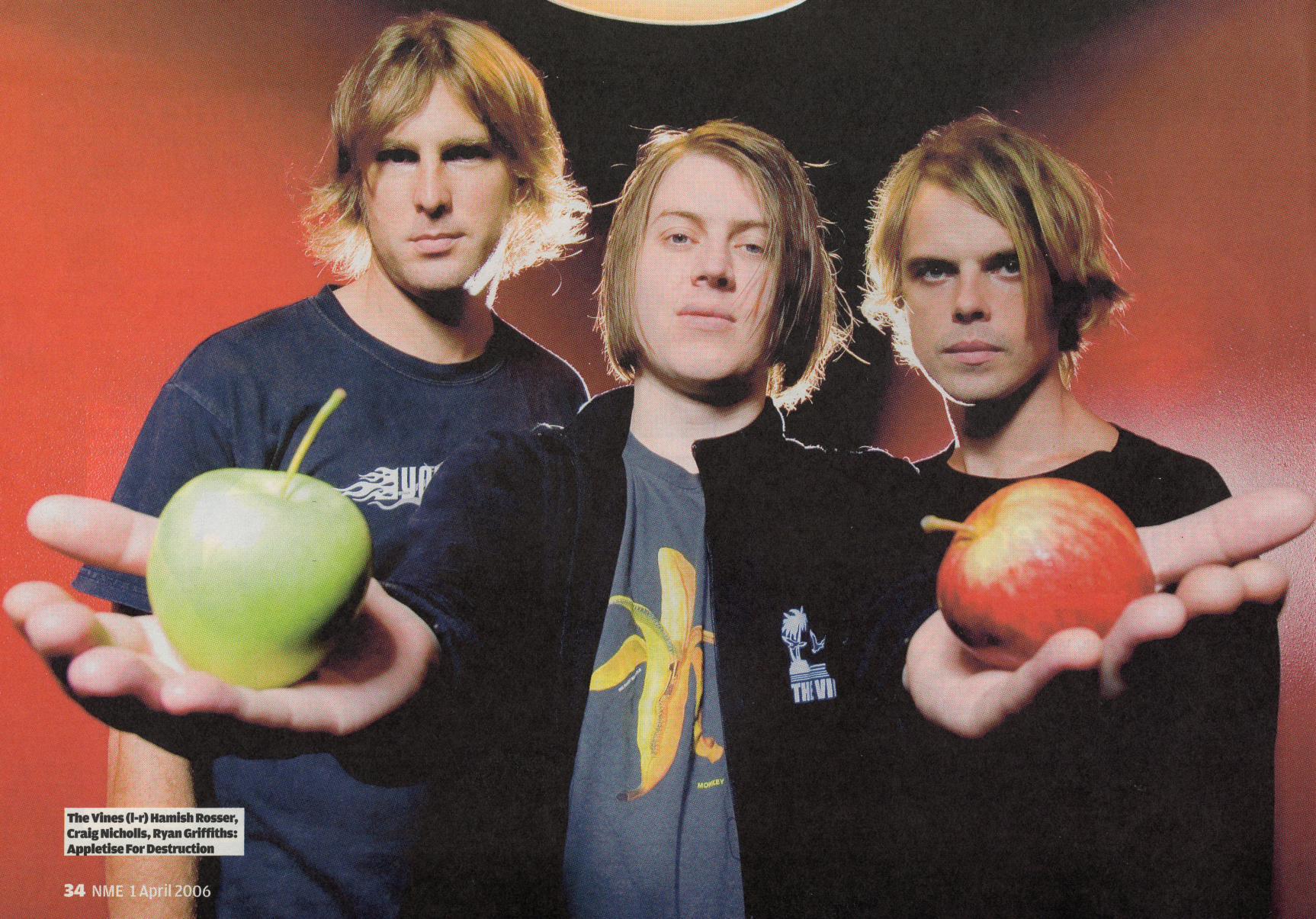


"I am a **Vine** All twisted and frayed"

When frontman **Craig Nicholls** was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome it seemed all over for **The Vines**. Two years on they're back with arguably their best album yet. Let the comeback begin...



The Vines (l-r) Hamish Rosser, Craig Nicholls, Ryan Griffiths: Appetite For Destruction

Uh-oh – Craig Nicholls is losing it. On a vast soundstage at Sydney's Fox Film Studios, next door to where they're filming the new *Superman* movie, The Vines' frontman looks set to unleash his own trademark brand of rock'n'roll kryptonite. As guitarist Ryan Griffiths and drummer Hamish Rosser lip-sync along to the umpteenth run-through of the stuttering pop juggernaut that is new single 'Anysound', Nicholls abandons the script and sends his guitar crashing to the ground.

KER-RAAASH! Grabbing hold of a stray broomstick, Nicholls flails it wildly above his head. As the video crew exchange nervous glances, the frontman collapses to his knees, and mimes a perfect guitar solo, sweeping the floor as he goes. It's a pure pop moment; enough to make you want to dash over to the *Daily Planet* offices next door and give Clark Kent the scoop: It's all true: Craig Nicholls really has cleaned up his act.

Make no mistake, The Vines' ride on the rock'n'rollercoaster has been bumpier than most. Having emerged as part of 2002's holy trinity completed by The Strokes and The White Stripes, their debut album 'Highly Evolved' sold two million copies.

Live, Craig Nicholls appeared simply not to be responsible for his actions. His eyes rolled; lyrics would be replaced by blood-curdling screams, and innocent guitars would get sacrificed nightly (on one particular tour, 57 were smashed on consecutive nights. Yes, 57). His behaviour went beyond the spoilt spasms of rock cliché or performance art. Baffling and brilliant, it was enough to convince both press and fans alike – not least Alex Turner of Arctic Monkeys, an avid fan – that Craig was "what being a singer is all about".

It soon became apparent, though, that there was a darker side to the Nicholls muse. Rumours of tantrums and inter-band fights regularly surfaced, while dealings with the press veered between monosyllabic stand-offs and incandescent rages. And that was when he showed up.

It all came to a head at Sydney's Annandale Hotel in May 2004. Faced with an audience comprised of the city's notoriously hostile music biz bods, Craig lashed out, injuring a female photographer in the front row. For the band's bassist and long-term Craig apologist Patrick Matthews, it proved the final straw. He announced he was leaving the band, and all future gigs were cancelled. In just under two years it appeared The Vines' electrical storm had burned itself out.

"At that point no one knew what was going to happen," explains The Vines' manager, Andy Kelly. "It was hard to see a way forward. But after Craig was diagnosed things slowly began to make sense."

It was The Vines' guitar tech Tony Bateman that first suspected Nicholls might be suffering from a medical condition rather than simple egomania, something confirmed when the singer was diagnosed as having Asperger's Syndrome. A mild

form of autism, sufferers often have a gift for words or music, but find it difficult to cope with stressful social situations. The diagnosis led to the singer's assault charge being dropped on the condition that he take medication and undergo therapy. And that, everyone assumed, was that.

And then, early in 2005, word came through that Craig had started writing again. "It wasn't so much of a surprise as confirmation – and vindication – that Craig is an incredible songwriter," explains Kelly. "Even when he was at his lowest ebb he had a vision for the album. Craig sang 'Vision Valley' to us on his acoustic guitar at his house one afternoon and it was mindblowing – as exciting as when we heard 'Get Free' for the first time. Then you realise: we're going to have to put this out."

The three remaining Vines gather in the offices of their management company. Together, they emit the fragile aura of those who have weathered both rock stardom and a tsunami-like backlash.

Clearly, these are still early days on the road to recovery. Ryan sheepishly admits he has just returned from a magic mushroom-assisted walk into The Bush, where he "nearly died". Hamish, meanwhile, models some hefty leg apparatus, having torn ligaments during a morning's body surfing session on Bondi beach.

And then there's Craig. Sporting a beige Blur T-shirt, and noticeably chunkier than when we last saw him (a combination of his medication and his mum's home cooking) he is a different entity from the self-destructive waif of 2002. Perhaps it's the mellowing effects of age (he's now 28) or, more likely, the mild sedation resulting from his medication, but the devastating force of Hurricane Craig which once saw him smash NME's cassette recorder on sight has been reduced to a rolling thunder.

Most animated when raving about his current favourite artists (Graham Coxon, Muse, Arctic Monkeys) Nicholls eyes the tape machine whirring under his nose with the circumspection he might afford an instrument of torture. Like fellow Asperger's sufferer Brian Wilson, he is friendly but seems blissfully unaware of anything outside his immediate vicinity; the original boy in the bubble. He still speaks in the

same slo-mo drawl as before, but when he smiles his face muscles tense up and it looks more like he's wincing. You can't help but think of the most pertinent lyric from 'Anysound': "I am a Vine/All twisted and frayed".

Was there ever a point when you thought the band was over?

Craig: "I guess after the Annandale gig, when we cancelled everything and Patrick left, it looked that way," he says. "It was like we'd broken up, but in the back of my head I knew we hadn't. We needed a break. We were all completely exhausted, but especially me."

Hamish: "We had a 40 date US tour supporting Incubus. I remember looking at the schedule, and in the middle of it we were due to fly to Japan to do Fuji Rock, then rejoin the tour, and then do some more dates. I just thought, 'We aren't going to make it.'"

Is it true that in the aftermath of Annandale, a local radio station started a hate campaign?

Ryan: "Yeah – it was kind of pathetic. They even burnt one of our guitars live on the radio. That was a shame. It was a perfectly good one,

too. A 200 buck Mexican Strat!" Hamish: "It was insane. You'd turn on the radio and there would be a trailer saying, 'Next time you hear from The Vines it'll sound like this: (adopts whiny voice) 'You want some fries with that, mate?'"

Looking back, did Craig's diagnosis come as a relief?

Hamish: "To be honest it doesn't really change anything. It wasn't like, 'Take two of these and it'll all be sweet.' It's something you're born with you didn't know about, and it's all just about making life as

easy as possible in the light of that."

Craig: "I always had an inkling something wasn't right. I just didn't know what it was. But I spoke to someone and it made a lot of sense as to why I'd feel a certain way about things and behave in a certain way. At first it wasn't easy. But it's been getting better. I've become more focused and I haven't

been out of control or anything like that. To be honest, I can't really remember a lot of what I did back then. It was just craziness."

How about the guitar smashing?

Craig: "It acted as a release. Smashing stuff becomes addictive. I didn't realise I was doing it. It was like I'd black-out. I was out of my mind I guess."

Sometimes it's right to judge an album by its cover. If the sleeve of 'Highly Evolved' felt like an invitation to a secret garden and 'Winning Day's' disturbing self-portrait was a clue to Craig's fragile mental state, then the minimalist artwork adorning 'Vision Valley' is as stripped down as the music within. Recorded in Sydney with local uber-producer Wayne Connolly, it's a staggering 33-minute burst of searing grunge-pop (77-second-long single 'Gross Out') and symphonic psychedelia (the mesmerising finale 'Spaceship') that far surpasses all of their previous recordings.

Does the title refer to a return to clarity after the chaos of before?

Craig: "Definitely." Ryan: "The title is about Silicon Valley too. I guess that's a theme throughout. How technology can make you feel really alone. I'd go round to Craig's and there would be nothing there. No phone, no radio, the TV would be unplugged... We'd record all night until we heard the birds singing in the morning." Hamish: "The last two records were both made in LA with constant pressure from the label. This time they left us alone to get on with it. I think you can hear that we're actually having some fun this time."

Inspired by repeated exposure to 'Imagine', Supergrass' '10' and 'Jim Carrey videos' the trio got back to the reason why they'd formed the band in the first place. And a group viewing of the *Dig!* film only made them realise how bad things could have got.

"I love The Brian Jonestown Massacre, but they're about as dysfunctional as a band could be – I related to it in a lot of ways!" says Ryan with a wry chuckle. "Anton [Newcombe, the BJM's deranged frontman] is so out there and funny, he's great. And the music is brilliant."

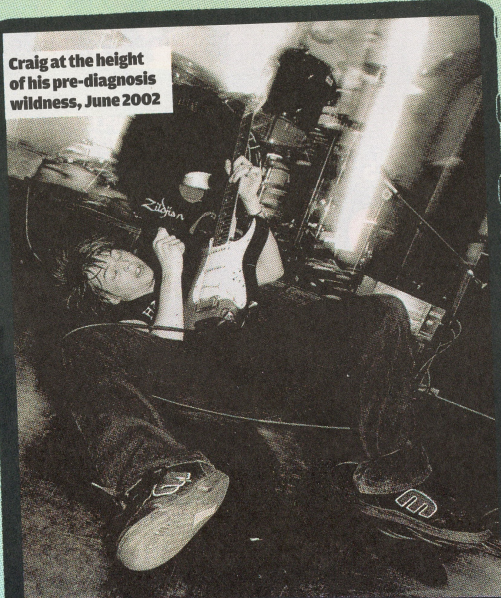
All of which, of course, could be said about The Vines. Interview over, we're allowed a glimpse of their day-to-day life. Ryan, we discover, is entrusted with chauffeuring Craig from A to B. "Time to take the maestro back to his castle!" he declares, to much hilarity.

One last question before we part: with the search on for a full-time bass player, are The Vines about to get back on the touring treadmill that almost destroyed them?

"We've been out of the loop so long, I'd like to play live again," considers Craig. "Maybe after the album's out. But this time we want it to be more controlled... Well, *organised chaos*."

But what if he should black out again and come-to surrounded by fragments of smashed guitar? "Oh, I don't think that'll happen. And besides," he gives what could be the first real smile of the day, "I've only got one guitar left!"

Craig at the height of his pre-diagnosis wildness, June 2002



"I always had an inkling something wasn't right. I just didn't know what it was" Craig Nicholls

The Vines rock NME, October 2002

